

Comprehensive Action Plan for Afghanistan

February 26, 2008

Afghanistan, the “good war,” is on the brink of being lost. But the failure of the US and international effort there is not a foregone conclusion. A thoughtful, wide-ranging shift in strategy can still avert Afghanistan’s likely fate as an irrevocable – and dangerous – failed state. Such a shift ought to include the following components.

I. The concept

The United States should redefine its objectives in favor of the Afghan *people*, not the Afghan government. If the Afghan government behaves in criminal ways, then the US should not support it.

Our mission statement should read: “To support the Afghan people in their effort to reconstitute their country and its social, economic, institutional, and cultural fabric.”

II. Security

If the US objective is redefined as above – and if the prize in any counter-insurgency is indeed the people – then the bulk of US military assets should be redeployed in ways that benefit large swathes of the Afghan population.

Small, mobile and lethally effective Special Forces teams are the units that should be assigned to the difficult fighting against seasoned guerrillas on steep terrain on the eastern edges of RC(E), especially in Kunar Province, and the eastern slopes of Paktika, Khost, and Paktia Provinces. Conventional infantry units operating out of fixed bases are sitting ducks there, their competitive advantages in intelligence and firepower effectively cancelled out. Those units should be redeployed to areas and tasks of greater benefit to the Afghan people. First among those is the durable reopening of Highway One to civilian and commercial traffic. Second is the protection of vulnerable civilians from intimidation and pressure by armed insurgents. We should consider basing platoons *in* villages, with a combined security and development mission, as the Marines successfully did in Vietnam.

III. Diplomacy

It is time that Pakistan, and its military ruler Gen. Musharraf, be recognized for what they are: a powerful force for *instability* in south Asia. The general has been playing us for fools for the past 7 years. It is unfair to ask our NATO allies to deploy in the most dangerous part of Afghanistan, when US tax dollars, in the form of military aid to Pakistan, are almost certainly buying the bullets and explosives that are killing their young men and women.

\$1 billion/year in military aid to Pakistan should be reduced and carefully monitored to ensure that it is not in fact financing the very insurgency it is supposed to combat. Pakistan *must* arrest or kill the leadership of a major part of the Taliban movement, commonly known as the Quetta *Shura*. If this is not done in a timely fashion, the US should take military action, as it has in the past against al-Qaeda figures.

The United States should unequivocally support the legitimate aspirations of the Pakistani people to be governed in a lawful and democratic fashion. We should not enjoin them to maintain Gen. Musharraf in a position of executive power if their elected parliament chooses to reduce his importance. We should support their desire to immediately release illegally arrested or confined legal and media professionals, and we should demand a relaxing of the police-state control of the border provinces, and an effective democratization there, in return for a massive injection of development aid into those regions.

Until the Pakistani army is credibly seen to oppose *jihadism*, it should not be the beneficiary of sophisticated US weaponry.

IV. Governance

We imposed the current government officials on the people of Afghanistan. It is our responsibility – and they expect this of us – to provide them with some recourse against the depredations of their government.

The United States should provide trained mentors for government officials, not just at the ministerial level in Kabul, but especially in the provinces and municipalities, where Afghan people experience their government. These mentors, who must be experienced administrators, while being canny and flexible of spirit, should not make decisions in place of the Afghans, but rather engage in true capacity-building, by helping and pressuring local officials on a day-to-day and case-by-case basis to make decisions that favor the interests of the citizens.

Every province or at least every regional command zone should have an ombudsman committee, made up of representatives from the key donor agencies, the lead country political advisor or diplomatic representative, the regional or task force deputy commander, and at least two courageous, independent Afghans. This committee should have a small, dedicated team of police officers, who will be trained in white-collar investigations, to examine complaints brought by citizens, and initiate their own investigations. Major complaints against government officials determined to be well-grounded should be brought to the officials' superior, eg. the governor, with a requirement that the wrong be redressed. The ombudsman committee must be responsible for follow-up.

In order to be materially able to refrain from corruption, civil servants need to be paid a living wage. Current salaries do not allow their recipients to buy an entire gunny sack of flour, of which a normal Afghan family of 8-10 people consumes two to three per month. Therefore the salaries of Afghan civil servants must be tripled at least, to reach at least \$250/month. Money for this is abundantly available in earnings from customs that are currently being siphoned off to line the pockets of regional strongmen. So enforcement action should be directed first at customs, in Herat, Kandahar, Jalalabad, and Mazar-i Sherif, with the increased take being dedicated to increasing civil servants' salaries in the west, south, east, and north, respectively.

V. Opium

The opium problem is an economic one, and should be addressed as such, and not as a noxious weed epidemic. Afghans grow opium because, for a variety of reasons, they are structurally forced into it by economic realities. Those realities need to be addressed.

Access to credit should be dramatically increased, especially in rural areas. That credit should not be limited to business uses, but should also be available for major household events such as the marriage of a son.

Subsidies should be offered to Afghan farmers in order to grow something that is *not* opium. For example, a massive reforestation effort should be launched, via private smallholders, who should be offered fruit tree saplings, and should be paid the amount of money they would earn from the produce of the mature trees *for the first five years*, while the trees are growing. The vast majority of Afghan landowners cannot afford to take large portions of their land effectively out of production for several years, and cannot turn away from opium unless it is materially possible to do so. Opium cannot grow under mature trees.

Water-conservative irrigation methods should be taught to those farmers receiving saplings. Solar powered water pumps could be distributed.

Concerted effort should be applied to the improvement of processing and packaging of Afghan fruit and dried fruit, so it can meet Western phyto-sanitary standards. Afghanistan currently lacks even the laboratory necessary to test its products. Such a laboratory should be powered by a stand-alone solar generator.

Farmers should be encouraged to begin using organic processes, and supported economically during the initial two-to-three year certification phase.

Development dollars should be spent on small-to-medium sized agro-processing businesses: collection dairies for the local market, fruit juice plants for the local market, fruit juice and jam plants for the international

market, extract plants (licorice, pomegranate seed) for the international market, seed oil plants for the local and international market, etc.

Interdiction efforts should be aimed at traffickers and profiteers, even when they hold government positions.

VI. Development

When Afghans think of “development,” they think of factories. US development dollars should be redeployed to better support the productive, job-creating, private sector.

Infrastructure improvements should be aimed at supporting economic activity. For example, the industrial zones in the six major cities should each be equipped with a dedicated 1-5 megawatt solar electric array to power factories located there.

International development aid should be financing the launch of Afghan manufacturing – we should not expect healthily risk-averse private investors to wade into an active theater of war. Such manufacturing should focus on labor-intensive, high-end artisanal products for export, and objects of local necessity for the domestic market. These investments should be supported by a pervasive “buy Afghan” advertising campaign.

Pressure should be put on the Afghan government to revise laws and regulations that penalize Afghan economic activity, such as the customs regime, which favors the import of manufactured goods over local production, and regulations imposing onerous reporting requirements on Afghan manufacturers, as well as absurd fines in case of delay.

General infrastructure improvements should be launched in as labor-intensive a way as possible, so as to absorb manpower that is currently being hired by the insurgency. A kind of Civilian Conservation Corps should be founded, whose members would attack some of the grave residual infrastructure problems, such as the electricity distribution systems in all the major cities. (All the wires need to be restrung.) Members of this corps would thus receive precious on-the-job training, gain a sense of esprit de corps, and a feeling of pride and “ownership” in the new Afghanistan. This initiative should also be supported with a public relations campaign, billboards extolling the efforts of the “Soldiers of Peace.”

In general, the institutional culture at USAID should change radically, to discourage its current self-satisfied, bureaucratic immobility. USAID officials should become more proactive and flexible, and be willing to do the work required to support smaller projects, rather than giving its money away in multi-million dollar chunks to private contractors that absorb half of our “development” dollars.